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AUTHOR Burns, Gary
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ABSTRACT

Although previous generations have by no means been disloyal to the popular music of their youth, the tenacious attachment of the Baby Boomers to the music of the 1960s seems unprecedented. Three main reasons account for this constantly widening musical reclamation project. First, the Baby Boomers have a clearer sense of generational identity that any other generation has had. They are incessantly studied, written, about, renamed, "targeted," and otherwise reminded of their own supposed uniqueness and importance. Second, the Baby Boom generation refuses to let go of childhood and youth. This notion of longevity is attributed in part to a lack of a clear connection to an acceptable history (in a sense, World War II ended history, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy did something similar). This resulted in a need of Baby Boomers to create a substitute culture which remains strongly embedded in their memories as they ultimately become a part of the mainstream. Finally, the mass media, especially in their marketing and advertising functions, encourage both the generational identity and longevity. Examples are seen in the repacking of the VH-1 video channel and MTV, the recycling of the 1960s songs in current advertising, and the musical/televisual attempts to reconfigure the present as consistent with past ideals. (KEH)

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Gary Burns, Communication Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, 815-753-1563

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Popular Music, Television, and Generational Identity

Conventional wisdom has it that popular music is oriented toward the present. It is here today and gone tomorrow. It resonates with other current "lifestyle" trends (fashion, dancing, movies, etc.) and news events. It celebrates the new, the young, and offbeat deviations from tradition.

While this view is certainly correct in many ways, it is equally true that there is a growing "cult" of the past in popular music. The principal forces driving this phenomenon are demographics and, curiously, technological advancement. New technologies such as compact disc make it possible to reclaim and "correct" more and more of the past, while hyperformatted FM radio and satellite cable TV networks such as MTV and VH-1 direct this music-of-youth to the Rock Generation, an ever-expanding category that seems to include an age range of about 5-45 (as of this writing). Thus technology and generational narcissism spur the desire for a constantly widening reclamation project.

The Me Generation Goes to Heaven

Abbie Hoffman said it shortly before he died: Don't trust anyone under 30. This reversal of the 1960s slogan captures well a certain demographic stereotype that crystallized about the time of the movie The Big Chill (1983). At that moment, it became fashionable for Baby Boomers to wallow self-righteously in middle-age angst, to the tune of 1960s hits. The purpose of the music in this case was not to establish diegetic period as in Shampoo or Coming Home--the action of The Big Chill takes place in the present. Rather, the main function of the music is to engender nostalgia and the aforementioned wallowing.

Although previous generations have by no means been disloyal

to the popular music of their youth, the tenacious attachment of the Baby Boom to Motown, the Beatles, et al. seems unprecedented. Three main reasons account for this: (1) the Baby Boom has a clearer sense of generational identity than any other generation has had; (2) the Baby Boom generation refuses to let go of childhood and youth; and (3) the mass media, especially in their marketing and advertising functions, encourage (1) and (2).

The Generation Thing

Not many generations have names, and certainly no generation has as many names as the Baby Boom-Bulge-Me Generation-Age Wave-Yuppies.[1] While one could argue that these five terms are not exactly synonymous, they are so nearly so that they all apply nicely to the main characters in both The Big Chill and the TV series thirtysomething.

Having been named so well and so often, Baby Boomers know who they are and that they are distinct from previous generations. They are incessantly studied, written about, renamed, "targeted," and otherwise reminded of their own supposed uniqueness and importance. They are indelibly associeted with The Sixties, that most hallowed/wallowed and intensely scrutinized of all decades. The metaphors that bind the generation together, at least according to popular mythology, include Vietnam, protest, and civil rights. Shoved back "in the closet" in such bowdlerized wallowings as the TV series Family Ties are the more decisive Big 3 metaphors of the '60s: sex, drugs, and . . . rock and roll. These are arguably even more powerful glue, even though drugs are increasingly, and have always been, fairly sharp dividers as well as unifiers, separating those who do from those who don't, and those

who used to from those who still do and those who never did. In fact, sex (especially as idealized in the hippie credo of free love) and drugs are mainly "honored" as faded, even discredited, ideologies, whereas music fondly evokes both the idea and experience of youth well wasted. Even one whose youth was "deprived" of profligate sex and drugs can, through music, relive the solidarity that ostensibly united the generation that supposedly pioneered the sex-drugs-rock combination.

Forever Young

It is not only a sense of generation that causes such interest in 1960s music. The same generation has lived through the 1970s and 1980s, yet there is no consensus of interest in popular music from these periods. Rather, radio stations, for example, play "the music you grew up with," thus directing their format to a specific age group eager to be reminded of a particular stage in their lives.

A poetically appropriate authority in this matter is Timothy Leary, who theorizes that adolescence is a time of heightened neural activity, during which music imprints itself with particular vigor on the nervous system. Barring subsequent "reprogramming," the music of adolescence becomes the music of one's life.[2]

But there is more than biology at work in the canonization of 1960s music. Equally fundamental to the longevity of these "oldies" is what Harold Schechter called the myth of the eternal child. As Schechter points out, this myth was especially prevalent in the 1960s.[3] In a sense, World War II ended history and established "Year Zero." The assassination of John F. Kennedy may have done something similar, so that a Baby Boomer in 1963 was both an adolescent or young adult and also a "child" in the sense of having been psychosocially "reprogrammed" or "wiped clean" by the Kennedy assassination. Thus the Baby Boomer's

childhood is detached from history because of World War II, and his or her adolescence or young adulthood is similarly detached because of 11-22-63.

Lacking a clear connection to an acceptable history, Baby Boomers tried to create their own substitute through the "counterculture" or "Movement" or "Woodstock Nation." The archaism of these monikers, which were momentarily plausible as synonyms for "Baby Boom," indicates the failure of this generational project and also suggests a societal "wiping clean" of an envisioned page of history.

Born three times into worlds without history, the Baby Boom is finally flowing in the mainstream, but some of the ghetto mentality remains from memories of school and other institutional encounters between Them and Us. Childhood having lasted so long, it is a familiar and sometimes comforting frame of mind, transcending, at least temporarily, barriers of class, occupation, geography, etc. To the Baby Boom, popular music is history, both personally and generationally. It provides solace from the pains of both the past and present. Old songs are good songs. And as popular culture frequently reminds us, from Casablanca to Elton John's "Sad Songs," even if a song was popular during a period of personal strife, the music provided solace then, and it is the solace (qua wallowing) we reexperience when we hear the song today.

Radio Plays That Forgotten Song

Those who run the mass media have been acutely sensitive to these trends. One of the latest examples is the repackaging of the VH-1 video channel into "the first channel for you." Who is "you"? Of course, it is "my generation," as one of VH-1's recurring segments has been titled. Lest there be any doubt which generation this is, the network specifically engages history by airing features such as "Woodstock Minutes," which

ran during summer 1989 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Woodstock rock festival.

These bite-sized chunks of history cascade along with the rest of the network's "flow," intermingling a once-transgressive or -transcendent festival with current videos and current commercials. The past-iche is occasionally reinforced via other means such as VH-1 Milestones (old news footage of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Muhammad Ali, the 1972 Republican convention, etc.) and compilation-type videos. The latter, including Marvin Gaye's What's Going On and Michael Jackson's Man in the Mirror, are in a way the ultimate form of historical-regurgitational wallowing, with topical footage decontextualized to serve the soundtrack as almost-abstract imagery. Once-urgent news events become aesthetic spectacle to remind My Generation of pre-couch potato dialectics.

Of course, "my generation" is also the "me generation," as demonstrated both by the aforementioned pronouns "my" and "you," and also by the focus on convenience in the VH-1 slogan "whenever you want it" ("it" casting the tube as metaphor for sex, the breast, and history-as-drug). Some of the promos from 1989 show a couple (and their young child) in bed watching VH-1. In a sense, they are watching themselves (a common theme also in music video), since VH-1 is you/me--narcissism is neatly combined with idealized imagery of the nuclear family.

The most puzzling ingredient in the VH-1 mixture is the insipid vjs, who have not been suitably hippified to address the older-than-MTV generation. In fact, MTV's too-pretty vjs seem positively articulate by comparison. VH-1 seems to have adopted, at least in its vj segments, a strategy based on what John Hartley called "paedocracy,"[4] which in

the present situation means addressing the middle-aged "target" audience as if they were children. Not a bad scheme for dealing with viewers who, despite being adults, are still called the baby boom. As VH-1's president put it, "We're targeting adults who are still growing up."[5]

An example with a different twist is the ill-fated song "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." Today it is, unfortunately, best known as the theme song for a group of claymated raisins who appeal to children and presumably to the child in us all. Previously the song was, also unfortunately, best known as the opening theme of The Big Chill. The raisin commercial transforms a sinister, on-the-edge love song into a jive sales vehicle, with black-stereotype raisins strutting their good rhythm while ex-counterculture demigod Buddy Miles stands in for the tragically-departed Marvin Gaye on the voice track. The Big Chill similarly decontextualizes the Gaye recording (not to mention Gladys Knight and even Creedence Clearwater Revival) and reframes the song as very-meaningful-to-white-people.

At a more general level, it is clear that advertising recontextualizes old songs in ways that are disturbing and even shocking. The Nike shoe commercial that cannibalized the Beatles' "Revolution" was a notorious case in point. Whatever John Lennon may have really meant about revolution, he did not mean to be selling shoes. Even more blatantly, a recent Nissan automobile commercial completely inverts the meaning of the O'Jays' song "For the Love of Money." The song condemns avarice. The commercial celebrates it by showing currency erupting from various orifices of a Nissan car, to dramatize how the car supposedly saves the buyer money. The song is changed so that only the refrain "Money money money" is used.

Hit songs are by definition enmeshed in the commercial system through which radio plays records and sells shoes, cars, and practically everything else that can be sold. Thus any hit that criticizes this system is born in irony. Still, hearing an anti-money song on AM radio in 1974 was somehow exhilarating, while hearing it as a paean to filthy lucre on TV in 1989 is infuriating.

Much of advertising's recycling of old music has this same character. Its purpose does not at all honor what the song originally meant but rather the sales objective of the moment. Objections to music video on grounds that the fixed visuals rob viewers' imaginations are misplaced. The real insidiousness lies in the theft of musical-countercultural ideologies of freedom, dissent, revolution, etc. by TV hucksters who feel free to use any piece of music to sell any product. The violation even extends to religious music such as "Carol of the Bells," which has been used in TV commercials for wine.

Similarly, records played unaltered and in their entirety, as on oldies radio, also change meaning as a result of the web of context that develops around them over the years. "Satisfaction" no longer clearly evokes summer 1965, because that evocation is diluted by the dozens of other times one has heard the song--on oldies radio, in concert, in remakes, at the ballpark, in Apocalypse Now, etc. And as the listener becomes older and presumably wiser, it is possible one begins to notice that "Satisfaction" is not a very good song. A good performance and recording, yes, brimming with snarl--but as a piece of songwriting, "Satisfaction" is undistinguished. One could excuse this in a hit from summer 1965, it that were all the song is. But after the 500th hearing, the song's flaws become acutely noticeable. One asks, why did I like

that song in 1965? Why is it still ubiquitous in 1989? Does this song really deserve to be in the Eternal Top 40?

Every time we hear an old song, we hear, and rearrange, its accumulated baggage. Repetition is "dialogic," and when we say a song has or has not "worn well" or "aged well," we are evaluating the original text and all its subsequent "baggage" in light of our present position. Those songs that have "worn well" with the masses, or at least with a demographic subset thereof, are identified by market research and played on radio almost as relentlessly as in their heyday. But the pleasure of oldies radio comes not only from the familiarity of the songs and the predictability of the format. The more interesting moments, actually, are those that violate one's expectation.

"The Music Lasts Forever--This Offer Won't"

Film theorist André Bazin held that the invention of cinema resulted from human beings' psychological impulse toward a "recreation of the world in its own image."[6] In the case of oldies radio, MTV "Closet Classics," greatest hits albums, and so on, a similar but distinct impulse is at work, namely the desire to preserve and reexperience the "image" (in this case, an acoustic image) that we have produced. The desire for stereo is often conceptualized as a quest to simulate a concert hall with perfect fidelity. But this is no longer the primary function of stereo sound and multitrack recording. The stereo recording is now usually the "original," and a concert performance is often a "reproduction," faithful or otherwise, of the recording.[7]

Walter Benjamin notwithstanding, the "original" recording has an aura. This aura is based on time, rather than on place as in Benjamin's discussion of statues in temples. The aura of a record arises from its immutability and repeatability. We hear the exact same

text (immutability) numerous times (repeatability). Further, the text of "Satisfaction" I heard on radio in Chicago in 1965 is exactly the same as the one someone else heard on a jukebox in Poughkeepsie in 1970.

Oldies radio and similar phenomena depend on our desire to reexperience an exact acoustic image. We want the Rolling Stones' version of "Satisfaction," not Devo's. However, there are cracks in the system which are both interesting and annoying.

If you listen to oldies radio, you are quite likely to hear recordings that differ from the texts originally played on AM radio. Examples include "Let's Hang On!", "Tighter, Tighter," "Cherry, Cherry," "Bend Me, Shape Me," "Penny Lane," "War," "I Can't Turn You Loose," and many others. The stereo mixes used on FM today often sound quite different from the mono and dj versions heard on AM years ago. CD rereleases often involve remixing, rerecording, restoring, and otherwise tampering with the "original."

These alterations disturb the aura of a recording, in much the same way that colorization changes a monochrome movie. Recording engineers reclaim a past we did not even know was there. Suddenly the text, and in a sense the past, is no longer immutable. The new improved past gains relevance but loses authenticity. The past changes not through inversion or denial, but through enhancement.

And so it is that the Columbia CD Club advertises best-of collections by the Who, Doors, and Led Zeppelin on Postmodern MTV. "The music lasts forever--this offer won't." In lasting forever, the music nonetheless changes, both in actual textual substance and in meaning. The Who and Doors especially were once countercultural but are now, apparently, postmodern. As audio fidelity becomes clearer and clearer, meaning blurs.

Similarly, as music becomes more intertwined with visual imagery, especially through music video, we see more but know less. Nine years after MTV's sign-on, there is general agreement that music video is trivial and vapid, yet somehow important. The semiotic slippage often attributed to video clips themselves has spread to MTV as the vehicle of their presentation. What originally was a carefully contrived package of rec-room set, brother/sister-next-door vjs, and New Wave-heavy metal clips in a rotation-format flow has now become something much different.

Gradually and quietly, MTV has taken a turn away from narrowcasting and format programming. Its "targeted age group" of 12-34[8] reaches into Baby Boom territory and far beyond the pimply teenage range one would expect. Significant programming changes include forays into alleged comdey, expanded roles for vjs and other personalities, and increased reliance on actual programs (as distinct from format).

While MTV's publicity maintains that its new programs are on the "cutting edge," overall the changes look a bit like retreat into tried-and-true formulas. Club MTV merely updates American Bandstand, with Tartar-Control Julie Brown in place of Ipana Dick Clark. Remote Control is the network's best comedy effort, but mainly because it is a parody of worn-out game show formulas.

Martha's Greatest Hits is an intriguing, quasi-historical presentation that dishes up a gumbo of past and present videos. The "classics" are disappointingly few and conservatively chosen. Host Martha Quinn is the main link with the past, since she was "one of MTV's original VJs," as an MTV press release proudly notes. In the short period she was away from MTV, she grew up and is now a sexy broad rather than a girl-next-door. Originally part of an undistinguished staff of interchangeable, hip-to-be-square presenters, she is now the

major object of promotion in a titled, scheduled slice of format disguised as a program. Ostensibly designed to appeal to people who watched MTV five years ago and who perhaps are less inclined to do so now, Martha's Greatest Hits is actually extremely soft as a dose of history or nostalgia. Nonetheless it is significant that MTV lays claim to video's past, as it has also done with the past of Baby Boom rock in Closet Classics. Less overtly than VH-1, MTV seems to be embarked on a similar project of engaging the Baby Boom and subsequent generations from "cradle to grave."[9]

Go Ahead--Make a Wish

As a final example of musical/televisual attempts to drag the past into the present (or, alternatively, to reconfigure the present as consistent with one's past ideals), we might look briefly at the Madonna "Like a Prayer" Pepsi commercial. Madonna is in many ways the quintessential music video star. By bringing together things that are not supposed to be brought together, she proposes new ways of understanding. For the most part, she does this visually, so that her propositions are largely nonverbal, nondiscursive, and intuitive. They are also ambiguous and leave her with plausible deniability that she intended to offend, blaspheme, etc.

The Pepsi commercial is an interesting attempt to have synthesis without any clash (an advertiser's dream) in three of Madonna's customary registers--race, religion, and generation.[10] The generational domain is stressed, probably because it connects with the ad campaign slogan "Pepsi, a generation ahead." Adult Madonna, in color, sits in her living room watching what is supposed to be home movie footage. A handheld sign in the monochrome "home movie" identifies the footage as "Madonna's eighth birthday." Magically, 8-year-old Madonna and 30-year-old Madonna

change places and explore each other's worlds.

The monochrome world expands into a joyous, interracial, church-and-school environment filled with dancing and singing. Thirty-year-old Madonna immediately becomes something of a Pied Piper in this world. Meanwhile, 8-year-old Madonna roams in awe, and in color, through 30-year-old Madonna's luxurious home. There are no other people in this world, but that does not bother 8-year-old Madonna. "Like a Prayer" wails triumphantly in both worlds. Suddenly the music stops, each Madonna is back in her proper world, and 30-year-old Madonna, sipping a Pepsi and addressing 8-year-old Madonna and the camera, instructs us: "Go ahead--make a wish." A graphic and male voice-over deliver the Pepsi slogan to conclude the commercial.

The ad flatters and congratulates the Baby Boom audience. The depicted means of generational articulation is the magic screen, a common device in music video. Thirty-year-old Madonna watches 8-year-old Madonna, and vice versa. The rapport between the two suggests a mother-daughter relationship. Madonna is both adult and child, mother and daughter (as in her video Papa Don't Preach, which also includes supposed home-movie footage of Madonna as a child). She is both the adult star and the child who longs to be a star. She is self-contained--the adult and child, because they are magically in touch and identical, are each other's fulfillment.

This commercial, expensively produced and itself promoted in advance by other commercials, was aired only once before being withdrawn by Pepsi in response to pressure from groups offended by the music video version of Like a Prayer, released one day after the commercial.[11] The commercial's "world premiere" (and unanticipated swansong) took place

during that sitcom oasis of racial and generational harmony, The Cosby Show.

Pepsi's textual strategy is clear--identify itself with racial harmony, religion, and the timeless unfolding of "new" generations. Just as laxative makers try to "have it both ways" by calling their product "gentle yet effective," Pepsi seeks to present itself as old yet new, black yet white, religious yet sexy. The formula for obtaining this unity in your own life is simple: make a wish.

So far so good for Pepsi, but the music video version of Like a Prayer carries unity a dangerous step further, beyond the bounds of home-movie narcissism and doctor-lawyer, both-black family sitcom. It also suggests the necessity to act, rather than just wish. As innocuous or enlightened or muddle-headed as the video may appear to some viewers, Pepsi could not endorse it, even indirectly by allowing the commercial to be replayed. For one evening, Pepsi was "a generation ahead," but quickly decided it was too far ahead. Unity of opposites is a theme that can be pushed to one limit on MTV and VH-1, and quite another in a Pepsi commercial. Interestingly, the only unity that Pepsi explicitly rejected was that of the commercial and video, which were after all united only by their soundtrack. Paradoxically, the music itself, once confined to to the fringes of television, is now mainstream. For better or worse, much of rock's residual potential for transgression is located in video, despite the fact that this potential is only rarely used. For her transgressions, we should absolve Madonna for making the video, even while lamenting that she made the commercial. Pepsi apparently hoped she was controversial yet safe, but discovered that she is only the former.

Conclusion: Because the Past Is Just a Goodbye

"People try to put us down," as pre-corporate Pete Townshend wrote, but sometimes it is hard to see how the process works. The

"generation gap" is a concept as extinct as that of the "counterculture," yet Townshend's generation is still put down by virtue of being so often a "targeted" group.

While it may sometimes appear that Baby Boomers have control, directly or indirectly, of much of the television and music industries, the relationship is reciprocal. The control of the Baby Boom depends in large part upon ideological regulation of the contested past, of what are now called "wonder years" and "Woodstock minutes." Nostalgia is safe. Thinking too seriously about the past and how it led to the present is dangerous.

Ultimately, the successful incorporation of the Baby Boom into the System involves redefinition of some basic terms. When Ed Bennett became President of VH-1 in June 1989, he quickly charted a new course for the network. The new VH-1 is "relevant and at times irreverent, and it values experience." Voila--new meanings for "relevant," "irreverent," and "experience." Even more to the point is the "attitude" (quite different from a rap-style attitude) Bennett wants the network to project: "having fun with love and work."[12] Ah--what a relief that our troubles are all behind us!

Notes

[1] Some other names that didn't stick: Pepsi Generation, Woodstock Nation, Movement, Counterculture, and, I predict, Destructive Generation.

[2] Timothy Leary, with Robert Anton Wilson and George A. Koopman, Neuropolitique (Las Vegas: Falcon Press, 1988).

[3] Harold Schechter, "The Myth of the Eternal Child in Sixties America," in The Popular Culture Reader, ed. Jack Nachbar, Deborah Weiser, and John L. Wright (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1978), pp. 64-78.

[4] John Hartley, "Invisible Fictions: Television Audiences, Paedocracy, Pleasure," in Television Studies: Textual Analysis, ed. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger, 1989), pp. 223-243.

[5] Ed Bennett, quoted in Andrew Grossman, "VH-1: Born Again," Cable World, November 20, 1989, p. 11.

[6] Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema" (1946), in What Is Cinema?, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 21.

[7] Ray Eldon Hiebert, Donald F. Ungurait, and Thomas W. Bohn, Mass Media III: An Introduction to Modern Communication (New York: Longman, 1982), p. 391.

[8] MTV press release, undated, ca. December 1989.

[9] My thanks to Joe Laposa for this idea.

[10] My discussion of the commercial is built upon my conference paper "Madonna: Like a Dichotomy," co-author Elizabeth Kizer, American Culture Association, Toronto, 1990.

[11] See Dave Marsh, "Acts of Contrition," Rock & Roll Confidential, May 1989, pp. 1-2.

[12] Ed Bennett, quoted in Grossman, "VH-1: Born Again," p. 11.